A New Islander Profile

by G. E. Mortimore

NEED AN ALLIGATOR?

A MONKEY escaped from custody and lived for several days in St. Andrew's Cathedral.

A man bought an alligator to use as a "watchdog" to prevent people from stealing orchids from his greenhouse.

Those events are among the memories of Mrs. Elaine Cowie, the proprietress of Victoria's oldest pet shop.

An attempted robbery of the pet shop was foiled when the budgerigars, canaries and other livestock raised such a clamor that the thieves were scared away.

Mrs. Cowie, who lives behind the store, heard the racket, came out, but saw nothing. Next day she found that one of the skylight panes had been pried off.

Another group of thieves who gained entrance succeeded in making off with $150, because Mrs. Cowie happened to be away at the time.

Not all her career as a vendor of small livestock has passed at such an exciting pace. More typical activities for Mrs. Cowie are handing over turtles and white mice in exchange for schoolboys' hard-earned coins; advising old ladies on the care of canaries; selling dog-lovers jewelled leads for poodles and selling dog-haters animal-repellent chemicals to spray around their gardens.

Mrs. Cowie and her late husband, Alexander Cowie, who died a year ago, started the business in 1920 after Mr. Cowie's return from the war. He had served in France.

"We were almost forced into it, because we were so fond of birds, and we had so many in a small apartment, that the birds almost took over . . . We began selling birds.

"In desperation we started a little store on Government Street next door to the New England Hotel. We had about one quarter of a store occupied by an old tailor named Giles.

"We moved here (1412 Douglas Street) in 1934. We started out with just birds, but we branched out into all kinds of pets."

The store used to import parrots, parakeets, and budgerigars. At least one parrot that the Cowies brought in 30 years ago is still flourishing in a Victoria home.

Because of an outbreak of a psittacosis or parrot fever, a disease which is dangerous to humans, the federal government prohibited the import of parrots and parrot-like birds.

All parrots and budgies now sold in Canada have been bred in the country.

The monkey that escaped was a female of a South American species. It found refuge in the Roman Catholic St. Andrew's Cathedral, corner of View and Blanshard Street. It haunted the cavernous interior of that building for about three days, evading all attempts at capture.

"Once it came down when a church service was on," Mrs. Cowie recalled. "A new bishop had just arrived in Victoria. When he saw the monkey descending, he just stood there shaking his head, as though to say — 'Well, this is Victoria.' "

The monkey came down in the evenings to sneak food out of the kitchen attached to the Cathedral. A cage containing the monkey's favorite foods was placed there, and after a time the monkey was trapped.

It happened to be a Wednesday, and the Cowies were away from the store, so the monkey was taken to the police station for the time being.

"She was fingerprinted," Mrs. Cowie said. "I was surprised to find out that monkey's fingerprints are in straight lines, not in whorls like people's fingerprints."

The only mass jail-break that occurred in the shop was a bid for freedom by five rabbits which managed to barge open the door of their hutch. But they only found themselves in a larger prison, because the doors of the shop were locked.

Mrs. Cowie came upon them in the morning. They had eaten 15 large potted ferns. (Plants are becoming an important sideline in the pet shop.)

There is nearly always at least one budgerigar loose in the shop. At the time I visited Mrs. Cowie, a blue budgerigar was clambering up the side of an empty cage.

A man leaned over the counter and said: "Did you know there was a bird loose?"

"Oh, yes, thanks," said Mrs. Cowie. She smiled, but there was a trace of impatience in her voice.

"We get told about it several times a day," she said to me in an aside. It is a knowing bird. It holds its position until a would-be captor is inches away, and then flutters toward the high ceiling.

MRS. ELAINE COWIE

The store sells about 2,000 goldfish a year, of about six different kinds. At one time the store used to buy its goldfish from Ontario breeders, but now most of them come from California.

Eastern Canada breeders insisted on shipping their fish in heavy galvanized iron containers, and after a time the freight costs became prohibitively high.

California producers ship their fish in lightweight containers to a Vancouver wholesale house, reducing the freight bill considerably.

Some people take a bowl of goldfish instead of flowers to hospital patients, Mrs. Cowie says.

Small painted turtles—about 800 of them each year—are shipped up to the pet store from Louisiana. They are gentle, slow-growing creatures. Under favorable conditions, they might grow to the size of a large saucer.

To a casual observer, the turtles may all look alike. But youngsters will stand for as long as half an hour inspecting turtles until they find one with personality and appearance that suits them.

Also brought in from Louisiana, about June, are baby crocodiles and alligators which retail at $1.50 up, depending upon size.

Crocodiles and alligators like warmth. They will live in ordinary house temperatures, but won't grow much. If placed in a greenhouse that is well heated all year round, however, they will grow to full size.

A Calgary orchid-grower, who had been troubled by visitors snipping off choice blossoms when he was busy elsewhere, bought an alligator from Mrs. Cowie to use as a watchdog.

He put a pool and some bushes inside his greenhouse, and tacked a sign saying "Beware of the Alligator." It wasn't a very large alligator, but since it spent much of its time concealed behind some shrubbery, people couldn't be sure; so they took no chances. The losses of flowers decreased sharply. Mrs. Cowie hasn't heard from the man for a long time, but it is possible that the alligator is still on guard. If so, it has grown much larger by now.

The late Mr. J. R. J. Llewellyn Jones of Cobble Hill had one of Mrs. Cowie's alligators in a greenhouse. Before his death, he sold up and moved to Vancouver. The last that the neighbors remember of the alligator, it was about two feet long. Its present whereabouts are unknown.

Sunfish and certain newts and tadpoles are bought locally, from enterprising small boys. Mrs. Cowie's chief supplier of sunfish is a lad who knows how to catch the fish on barbless hooks, so as not to do them any permanent damage. And he always turns up punctually each week.

Mrs. Cowie no longer handles delicate tropical fish, which need considerable care. In the days when she did handle them, she came back after a day's absence to find that an unskilled helper had let the temperature go down slightly, and $100 worth of fish were dead.

Stock in the store includes bantams, pigeons, lizards, newts, guinea pigs, hamsters, dogs, cats, plants, seeds, animal medicines, accessories and animal repellants, and shells and pieces of driftwood which Mrs. Cowie picks up on beaches and sells to people who make them into lamps or simply hang them on the wall for their ornamental value.

Dogs, both cross-bred and pure-bred, are carried on consignment only. Their owners pick them up at the end of the day.

"The first three days of the week, and Saturday afternoons, are the buying days for plants; the last three days of the week for puppies," Mrs. Cowie says. "I don't know why, but that is the way it works out."

People wanting to find a home for a cat pay the store $1 to cover the cost of food. "We don't make any profit on it," Mrs. Cowie says.

Some people spend as much or more on special minerals, vitamins and foods for their pets as they would on themselves.

Elaborate accessories for some pets are on sale: for example, 50 different kinds of toys for budgies—ferris wheels, ladders, musical wheels and scales which weigh the bird when he jumps on to eat his tonic seed.

There are velvet and jewelled collars and leads for poodles, selling for as much as $15; poodle coats; catnip mice for cats; chemical-impregnated collars which aim to rid cats and dogs of fleas.

There are seeds from which cat-owners can grow their own catnip.

The amount of shoplifting in the store has risen sharply in the last two years.

"If they were stealing food or clothes, I could understand it," Mrs. Cowie says, "But they'll steal things like a big garden sprinkler, or a book on pet care."

For many years the Cowies did not have any living quarters apart from their 40-foot cabin cruiser, Cover Girl, which contained all modern conveniences, except a telephone—which they were glad to escape.

Since her husband's death, Mrs. Cowie has lived in quarters at the back of the store.

The store is a pleasant place, filled with twitters, whistles and squeaks, and the smell of earth, disinfectant, birds and animals.

Looking after all the creatures, cleaning cages and tanks, changing water and supplying food, is a never-ending task. But Mrs. Cowie finds a great deal of pleasure in it. Birds, animals and even some fish seem to have individual personalities, as different from one another as humans are, and the owner of the pet shop enjoys getting to know them.

The merchant-customer relationship is warmer and more friendly in a pet shop than it is in other stores, Mrs. Cowie feels.

When a customer has brought in a budgeriger for the free toenail-clipping service, or has boarded a canary for a week during a holiday, he and the storekeeper have something to talk about. Many people come back for years afterwards for advice on the welfare of their birds, animals or fish.

Small boys sometimes come in to inspect a newly-born litter of hamsters, or a guinea pig, and display the 50 cents that they have saved toward the purchase price. "I'll earn the rest of it by next week," they promise.

Some people just come in to look around. An old Chinese gentleman comes in regularly, hand-in-hand with a small boy who seems to be his grandson.

For many people, penned in apartments, it is a pleasure to see living things.

"There was one old man who used to come in a lot and look around. One day he said: 'You must get sick of me coming in all the time and not buying anything.'

"I told him 'Oh no, we're glad to have you come in.' And he said, 'Things have changed, and this is the first time in 40 years that there hasn't been a puppy growing up in my house.'

"And I thought to myself, what a nice house that must have been," Mrs. Cowie said.